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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [BL](#) [GOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: EVO ASSAILS "TREASONOUS" CATHOLIC CHURCH HIERARCHY

Classified By: EcoPol Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Bolivian President Evo Morales accused the Catholic Church hierarchy of "treason and deception" on April 19, casting doubt on the Church's future role as a mediator in the growing crisis between the Government and the opposition prefects in the eastern lowlands. Morales was reportedly infuriated by Cardinal Terrazas's comments challenging the Government's claims that slavery continues to exist in parts of Bolivia. President Morales' actions are in keeping with earlier attempts to highlight international support for his Government and to criticize and isolate those who would contradict or disagree with his positions. End Summary.

YOU SAY SLAVERY, I SAY INDENTURED SERVITUDE

¶2. (C) The conflict with the Catholic Church erupted following the Government of Bolivia's April 10 assertions that slavery exists in parts of Bolivia, including the Southern "Chaco" region, and that "more than one thousand Guarani families work as slaves in the Chaco." (Comment: The claims were likely designed to fortify Government as-yet unsuccessful efforts to redistribute land in the Chaco. End Comment). In a sermon delivered to his congregation in Santa Cruz on April 13, Cardinal Terrazas responded that it was incumbent on the Government to "show us the proof (of slavery), and let us know where we can find them" since it was "no longer possible for us to just continue attacking each other with slogans." Following this challenge from the Church, the Government Vice-Minister of Lands back-tracked somewhat the following day, stating that the Government utilized the word slavery "figuratively" to describe conditions of indentured servitude where workers in effect are not compensated for their work.

¶3. (C) Clearly unhappy with this pushback, Morales lashed out at the Catholic Church on April 19 for what he termed its "treason and deception." While delivering agricultural

machinery to the town of San Julian in Santa Cruz, Morales fumed that it "doesn't matter that the (Cardinal and bishops) won't help us in our fight, but they should help the people who need it." Cardinal Terrazas responded on April 20 with an appeal for calm and opined that the President is "poorly informed" about the situation and the Church's presence in the Chaco. The Cardinal said that in spite of these attacks the Church would "turn the other cheek" but would continue to speak the truth. In a clear expression of displeasure with the Catholic Church, Morales met with representatives of the Methodist Church and expressed his historical and current support for this denomination.

ARCHBISHOP WELCOMES MEDIATION, BUT NOT OPTIMISTIC

14. (C) The Charge met privately with Archbishop Tito Solari during a visit to Cochabamba on Friday, April 18. Reflecting on the last two years, Solari expressed regret that the hopes that President Morales would be able to deliver democracy and improved economic conditions to Bolivia's marginalized classes had dissolved. The Archbishop lamented Morales's inability to deliver inclusive change to Bolivia; instead the country has become more divided into increasingly polarized civil groups. Solari offered that not all social groups are for Evo, despite what he termed as Morales' trademark in attempting to take over those social groups seen to be "veering off course." He bemoaned the pattern of "attack, counter-attack" that characterizes the current state of affairs in Bolivia, observing that Evo himself clearly feels under attack from many fronts ("as an Indian, as a cocalero") and is desperate at this point.

15. (C) Solari observed that the Church was completely caught off guard by the violence in Cochabamba in January 11, 2006 and at the time did not even know which players to consult to try to calm the situation. They have clearly done their homework since then and have welcomed the potential role as mediator of the conflict. The Archbishop postulated that serious negotiations would not commence until after the May 5 referendum vote in Santa Cruz, as the two sides were "obviously preparing more for confrontation than for dialogue." Solari expressed the Church's concern for potential violence in Santa Cruz, especially given rumors about arms entering into both camps.

16. (C) Solari highlighted the difficulty facing any future negotiations, as both sides are so fragmented. He commented that there is no cohesion among the opposition prefects, and on the other side that President Morales is influenced by competing advisors with their own agendas, particularly Minister of the Presidency Juan Ramon Quintana, Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera, and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Although Solari remarked that in meetings the Church's representatives had always found that everyone eventually looked to Evo for decisions, he did not seem clear about whether it would be Evo who would decide about whether and how to end the current conflict, and if so on what terms. "God help us," he concluded.

17. (C) Comment. President Morales' harsh rebuke of the Catholic Church reflects his "for us or against us" mentality and his preference for "mediators" with a pro-government slant. The Morales administration is quick to cite the comments of any international observers who offer words of support and has on several occasions even twisted their words to try to discredit and de-legitimize the upcoming Santa Cruz referendum. President Morales departed for the United States on April 21 to attend the Permanent Forum on Indigenous issues and reportedly to seek international support to "end slavery in Bolivia." Evo will also give a speech at Brown University.

18. (C) The question remains what will happen in Santa Cruz on May 4, and more importantly what will happen on May 5 and thereafter. Most agree that if hard-line social groups loyal to the MAS government enter Santa Cruz city on May 4 and

attempt to disrupt the autonomy referendum, there will be violence. If the violence results in deaths, the Government could take a hard-line and declare martial law. In any case, most observers agree that the only way out of the current stalemate is for the Government and opposition prefects to sit down and negotiate. End Comment.

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